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# Contributive Justice: Social Class and Graduate Employment in the UK

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**Abstract:** *This article applies Paul Gomberg's theory of contributive justice to the problematic of working-class graduates' access to skilled and meaningful work in the UK. I begin by outlining Gomberg's argument for the importance of quality work as a key social good. I then draw upon a range of sociologically-informed literature to offer a two-fold argument. Firstly, I contend that the UK suffers from a structural misalignment between graduate demand for high-skilled employment and the supply the labour market can provide; secondly, that working-class graduates are disproportionately likely to encounter problems in gaining quality work, at least in their early-stage careers. To understand these issues as questions of social justice, I apply Gomberg's thesis throughout the discussion. I conclude by reflecting upon the value of Gomberg's theory to studies such as this, which take a sociologically-informed approach to the interface between education and work. I argue that Gomberg's neo-Aristotelian theory, wherein work is central to human flourishing, offers a framework through which we may make explicit our normally implicit evaluations and critiques.*

## Introduction

This article argues that we should view social class-based inequalities in graduates' abilities to access quality employment as a question of social justice. By the term 'quality', I refer to labour that enables individuals to exercise developed abilities in work that is meaningful to them and from which they derive both personal and social esteem. This represents a departure from

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dominant policy-level discourse around graduate employment in England which is underpinned by an incomes-related *distributive* notion of social justice or, more simply, who gets what (Sayer 2011). Drawing upon a broad range of literature, I advance two propositions in support of my argument: firstly, that significant numbers of graduates in the UK do not gain high-quality employment, at least in their early-stage careers; secondly, that graduates from working-class backgrounds have a disproportionate likelihood of being in this category. While there is now a wide range of sociological studies that has examined the mismatch between working-class graduate skills, aspirations and their employment outcomes, the question of how we frame the *importance* of quality work to individuals is left largely implicit. The particular contribution of this article shall be to marry the insights gained from the sociological literature with a critically normative framework which addresses itself directly to this question—the theory of contributive justice as elaborated by the U.S philosopher Paul Gomberg.

The use of Gomberg’s theory within a sociologically-focused article is somewhat unusual in that it is at heart a normative thesis about inequality and, therefore, something that may more readily be associated with political philosophy than sociology. Furthermore, the key focus of Gomberg’s (2007) theory is upon racial inequalities and work, although his ideas have been applied to a growing range of areas, for example, to the study of marginalised young people's schooling (Mills et al. 2016) and to the analysis of familial inter-generational inequality (Calder, 2016). They have not, however, yet been applied to the particular problematic of class-based inequalities in access to quality graduate work. As I argue, Gomberg’s neo-Aristotelian framework, which locates work as a key element in human flourishing and esteem, is of particular value to our understanding of such inequalities as questions of social justice. Beyond this, however, Gomberg’s thesis has wider application within the sociology of education and

work as it offers a normative framework through which we may render explicit what are often implicit evaluations and critiques.

### **Work: Distributive or Contributive Justice?**

In relation to employment there are, broadly speaking, two traditions of social justice. The distributive justice school of thought, derived from neo-classical economics, views labour not as a social good but as a burden: the social good resides in what we receive from our labour (money) which then provides access to social goods such as leisure activities. A well-known example of this approach is Keynes' thought-piece *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, published in 1930. In this slim volume, Keynes predicts that, by a combination of capital accumulation and technological advancement, generations of a hundred years hence would have no need to work. Keynes' utopian view of a voluntarily workless future is premised upon a distributive view of work because, for him, we work simply to survive. Once that need was removed we would ultimately no longer want to do so (Pecchi and Piga 2008, 23).

The other broad tradition of social justice thinking has an even longer pedigree stretching back to Aristotle. This school views labour as an intrinsic part of the 'Good Life' and makes a normative claim for the value of 'eudemonistically meaningful work that *'...contributes to human happiness or flourishing by developing or exercising agency, skills, or capabilities, especially insofar as this exercise meets with recognition and esteem'* (Veltman 2015, 726). An example of this perspective, from roughly the same period as Keynes' work, is *The Acquisitive Society* by the Christian-Socialist economic historian and cultural critic, R.H. Tawney, published in 1921. In this seminal work, Tawney advocates putting power into the hands of the workers through worker-led co-operatives and engendering a sense of 'professional feeling' among workers. And

it is via this latter aspect that Tawney's work belongs within this second tradition. For, while Tawney acknowledges that all workers are motivated to some extent by financial gain, he explicitly rejects the 'hedonistic calculus' which determines that they will always seek the least work for the most money (Tawney 1921, 198). Rather, he argues that a recognised standard of effort required by one's peer group, a desire for esteem among fellow workers, a wish to be recognised for success, and an intrinsic interest in the work will serve as key sources of non-financial motivation (Tawney 1921, 193-4).

In the post-1945 period, a sociology of work has emerged which has continued to take a strong interest in the quality of paid employment. For example, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 251) echo Tawney's call for employee-led enterprises, and for broadly the same reasons. While Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) are concerned primarily with how the structures of paid employment affect the quality of work experiences, Sennett (2008) offers a more comprehensive theory of quality work. For Sennett (2008, 20), 'craftsmanship' denotes the unique human condition of becoming *engaged* in an activity, but not necessarily instrumentally or for financial gain, and which is characterised by a constant impulse to improve one's skills. Crucially, true craftsmanship requires time, perseverance and the freedom to engage in intellectual curiosity. As with Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), Sennett (2008, 45) contends that contemporary advanced capitalist societies militate strongly against high quality work, arguing that market-driven pressures, technology and performativity tend towards 'functionality' rather than 'correctness'. In making his case, Sennett (2008) provides us with a theory of what he believes to be the features of high-quality work. I shall now turn to the work of Paul Gombert, a writer who is less concerned with *what* high-quality work may be than with its socio-relational effects.

Gomberg offers a complex thesis, which he terms contributive justice, with its core consisting of two inter-related propositions: firstly, that meaningful work is a basic social good and, secondly, that the model of distributive justice premised upon competitive equal opportunity, as practiced across advanced capitalist nations, cannot provide this social good (Gomberg, 2007; 2010; 2016). Turning to the first of these propositions, Gomberg (2007) follows a long Aristotelian tradition in arguing for 'The Good Life'. This consists of a 'constellation of goods': developing and performing complex activities; contributing one's abilities for the benefit of others; self-esteem and being esteemed by others (Gomberg 2007; 2010; 2016). He then proposes three subsidiary theses about the linkages between these social goods of complexity, contribution and esteem: what we contribute is key to our own self-esteem and how we are esteemed by others; we gain greater self-esteem and esteem from others for contribution of complex rather than routine abilities; the practice of complex abilities in everyday social labour directly affects other activities and our general sense of well-being (Gomberg 2007; 2016). He argues that, while distributive social justice within a competitive market economy necessarily places limits upon opportunities for its social good (as wealth has a finite supply), there is *potentially* no limit to the opportunities for the social goods proposed by contributive justice: self-esteem and social esteem (Gomberg 2007; 2016). Importantly, though, these types of esteem are different and they derive from two key sources that are, in reality, differentially distributed: norms of identity and norms of prestige.

Norms of identity relate to the quality of our contribution within a particular social role and our conformity with the norms implicit within that identity. The social role will include but not be limited to paid employment, and thus encompasses identities such as 'teacher' or 'parent'

(Gomberg, 2007). Norms of prestige differ in that they derive from the social status attached to a particular position and, again, this will include but not be restricted to paid employment (Gomberg, 2007). The self-esteem we may gain from work (whether paid or not) thus reflects its dual nature as a source of both norms of identity and norms of prestige: a teacher is an identity grounded in broadly accepted norms of good teaching practices where self-esteem and social esteem come from the approval of peers, students etc of what one *does*; it is also a source of relative social status as a professional job where our self-esteem and social esteem derive from what one *is*, that is, the social esteem surrounding the position (Gomberg 2007; 2016). For Gomberg (2007, 59), the distinction between the two sources of esteem is crucial because, while the political economies of advanced capitalist societies offer only limited positions of social prestige (norms of prestige), there is no limit to the number of people who may be esteemed for the quality of their contribution within the norms of their role (norms of identity).

Gomberg's (2007) distinction is useful in highlighting the tensions between the two sources of esteem. For example, in relation to unwaged labour, androcentric norms have the effect that the division of domestic labour continues to place the burden of caregiving and household cleaning upon women (Gomberg 2007). Androcentrism then means that, because such labour becomes socially defined as women's work, it attracts less social prestige than that which is more typically associated with men such as household handiwork (Sayer 2009) despite the fact that caregiving is a mixture of both routine and highly complex tasks (Gomberg 2007). Of course, an individual woman may nevertheless obtain *personal* satisfaction from a social role in which she assumes primary responsibility for caregiving and household cleaning. Gomberg (2007) recognises this point in noting that people may derive esteem from the norms of identity within seemingly low

prestige employment or from non-employment sources such as working in their community (Gomberg 1995; 2007).

However, the focus of Gomberg's theory of contributive justice is upon the relationship between social esteem, self-esteem and paid employment. As Veltman (2015, 738) notes in general support of Gomberg (2007), while we may gain self-esteem from non-employment sources or discretionary social activities, paid work remains central to most people's material survival and is thus an imperative. Waged labour is also *the* key site of social prestige and, to the extent that our self-esteem depends on holding a position of prestige via paid employment (as will be the case in competitive marketised societies), we may compete not only for social prestige but also for self-esteem—and, thus, self-esteem can itself become a scarce good (Gomberg 1995; 2007; 2016). Moreover, for Gomberg (2007) the key social justice question is not whether a person may lead a good life through means other than challenging, complex work but whether the social organisation of employment makes it more or less likely that an individual will do so. Here, then, I consider Gomberg's (1995; 2007) second key proposition: that competitive equal opportunity cannot provide The Good Life.

For Gomberg (1995; 2007) positions of prestige, and thus of esteem, derived from waged labour are of limited supply because of the division of labour. Gomberg (2007, 11) argues that there are two principal divisions of labour: one between organisation and execution (management and workers) and the other is between routine and complex labour. And it is this latter division of labour in particular, where jobs run along a spectrum of complexity, that militates against contributive justice and The Good Life. Here, Gomberg's (2007) sociology has much in common with Braverman's seminal thesis (1974/1998, 294) which argued that the capitalist profit motive, when allied with automation of production, facilitated a Taylorist division of labour that



produced a tiny managerial/technocratic knowledge elite but which left the majority of workers alienated by routinised labour. Gomberg (1995; 2007; 2016) however, goes further than Braverman in arguing that a society with a limited number of complex, high-prestige jobs—even where all opportunity were equal—will still, of necessity, limit opportunity for such employment. And, as he goes on to note, the problems of limited opportunity are exacerbated under conditions of market economies. This is because markets are built upon ‘productive efficiency’, that is, maximizing the quantity and quality of goods produced and not with the creation of high-skilled positions per se (Gomberg, 2007, 142). Indeed, Gomberg (2007, 143) goes further in noting that deskilling labour is often more productively efficient, an argument that, as I shall note, he shares with other commentators (Braverman, 1974/1998; Keep and Mayhew 2014; Lauder, Brown and Cheung 2018).

If the above may be considered Gomberg’s (2007) ‘pragmatic’ critique of markets, he also tackles their ethical dimensions: markets are normative with their own conceptions of right and wrong and function upon values that are individualist and not egalitarian. As that stands, there is nothing controversial about this view as it is shared both by critics of marketisation (Hall 2016; Mirowski 2013) and by its most ardent advocates (Hayek 1982). The tension between the two sets of values emerges from the fact that individualist values promote a conception of ‘the good’ which privileges devotion to our own well-being and that of our families and, in contemporary advanced capitalist societies, we use money to advance this good (Gomberg 2007; 2016). The fungible quality of money—that it can buy access to almost any social good—means that economically advantaged families will be able to pass on those resources to their children to enable them to gain labour market advantage. Thus, at the micro-level, there may be a clear harmony between distributive and contributive justice: an individual may both seek to maximise

their earning potential and obtain meaningful employment. However, the aggregate effect of many self-interested actions on an unequal playing field is sedimented labour market disadvantage. When this, in turn, is allied to the fact that a finite supply of skilled work *necessarily* means limited opportunities to access it, both distributive *and* contributive justice become denied to many people (Gomberg, 2007; 2016).

In sum, sociologically, Gomberg is a neo-Marxian structuralist while, philosophically, he is a radical egalitarian who believes in human flourishing through the contribution of skilled and meaningful work--a stance which also owes an explicit debt to Marx via Aristotle (Gomberg, 2016). Both these positions shape the ethical heart of his thesis. Thus, Gomberg's sociology leads him to argue that it is the *quantity* of opportunity (as available through the number of 'good' jobs) as opposed to the *equality* of opportunity which really matters in the provision of social justice. Thus, for Gomberg (2007; 2016), the inevitable inequalities in access to quality work created by the structural division of labour within advanced capitalist economies form the first and most fundamental source of injustice. However, these first premise inequalities become exacerbated by the secondary sources of injustice produced by the 'strong socialization principle': the fact that children tend to be socialised (along 'race', class and gendered lines) in numbers that approximate the available opportunities since, "No society will socialize many to do what only a few can do" (Gomberg, 2016, 39). Here, then, inequalities are structural as opposed to products of mere luck or individuals' own choice-making. Gomberg's philosophy of human fulfilment through meaningful work is also a deeply ethical one. Indeed, Gomberg (2016, 45) implies that his thesis enjoys the moral weight of broad acceptability because it starts from widely agreed premises about the social goods necessary to a good human life, (unlike the theories and practices of distributive justice which he contests).

In the next section I turn to the first of my propositions: that considerable numbers of early-career graduates are unable to gain skilled and meaningful work in the UK.

### **Graduate Employment as a question of Contributive Justice**

Unlike in many of its continental European neighbours, the link between higher education credentials and graduate employment in the UK has historically been loose, whereby many graduates entered jobs with no direct relation to their studies and employers, faced with a relatively small and relatively homogeneous graduate cohort, functioned with a generally tacit sense of graduate knowledge and skill sets (Tholen et al. 2016; Tomlinson 2012). Increased numbers of graduates, a more heterogeneous graduate body, and growing ‘graduatisation’ wherein many employment sectors historically staffed by non-graduates are now recruiting increasing numbers of graduates, have all meant that this simultaneously loose and close relationship has been somewhat broken (Brown 2013; Tholen 2014; Tomlinson 2012).

In this section, I discuss what this shifting coupling between HE and the labour market means for graduates’ chances of accessing graduate-level employment. I then discuss the meaning of these broad employment patterns in the light of Gombert’s theory of contributive justice. Firstly, however, I note that my use of ‘graduate-level’ as a proxy for ‘high-quality’ employment as I have defined it previously has its own limitations. The two are by no means coterminous. Nevertheless, I have centered discussion around a graduate/non-graduate-level employment binary because it is one most commonly employed across the relevant literature, and also it raises questions of skills usage that are relevant to the concept of high-quality work. Secondly, in accepting this division, it is then necessary to disentangle a thicket of conceptual questions around what we understand to be the difference between graduate and non-graduate employment.

In recent years, several authors have addressed themselves to this matter by developing employment typologies of forms of graduate and non-graduate work. As I have indicated, these typologies are premised largely upon the issue of skills and knowledge utilisation within work. This approach contrasts with one that simply defines graduate work via the question of whether degree credentials are necessary to gain entry to employment. Following a skills-usage approach, Green and Zhu (2010) note what may appear to be two contradictory key findings: rising levels of *formal* over-qualification for their period of study between 1992 and 2006 but levels of self-reported skills under-utilisation that remained at only around ten percent during this time (Green and Zhu 2010, 754). On this last finding, it is worth noting that the survey period for this study pre-dated the onset of The Great Recession and the same research today may yield different results.

An influential, but more pessimistic, view of skills utilisation within contemporary labour markets is that of Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011). They argue that global IT developments within large corporations can now, ‘...*translate knowledge work into working knowledge where what is in the minds of employees is captured, codified in the form of digital software, including online manuals and computer programs that can be controlled by companies and used by other often less skilled workers*’ (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011, 66). They term this process ‘Digital Taylorism’ and maintain that there is evidence of it spreading across swathes of industries associated with the knowledge economy (Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011, 67). Consequently, they foresee a three-fold typology of workers: ‘Developers’, an elite of managers and researchers with valued thinking skills; ‘Demonstrators’, a second tier of workers who implement existing, often prepackaged, knowledge; ‘Drones’, the lowest level of employees engaged in monotonous and highly regularised work (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011, 80). Under this scenario,

Developers will only constitute, at most, 15 percent of the workforce so most graduates will cluster within the lower two tiers with, as Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011, 67) contend, profound implications for the relationship between education, jobs and rewards.

A more optimistic perspective on the demand for graduate skills comes from Elias and Purcell (2013). Drawing upon two key labour force datasets, Elias and Purcell (2013) elaborated a four-fold typology of graduate employment. ‘Experts’ are those who daily deploy their specialist HE knowledge; ‘Orchestrators’ orchestrate, that is, manage their knowledge and that of others; ‘Communicators’ employ interpersonal skills or advanced technical knowledge (Elias and Purcell 2013, 7). The fourth category relates to non-graduate work. Following this framework, the authors note two key findings: an overall increase in graduate level jobs but a proportionate rise in the number of graduates in non-graduate work (Elias and Purcell 2013, 17). This latter finding was ascribed to the cyclical fluctuations of the economy, notably the Great Recession originating in the banking crash of 2008, rather than to more structural misalignments within the labour market (Elias and Purcell 2013, 17).

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have addressed themselves to the issue of ‘occupational filtering down’ by examining graduatising areas of the labour market. By using large-scale data from the UK’s Work Employment Relations Survey, the CIPD (2015) found that, although there were some examples of job upgrading (i.e., jobs with a clear difference between the skills requirements of graduates and non-graduates) following graduation, *‘...more than half of the job groups (defined by occupation and industry) showed no evidence of this process, and in some cases, graduate workers report lower levels of influence and discretion than their non-graduate counterparts within the same occupation’* (CIPD 2015, 29).

Green and Henseke (2016) employ a two-fold typology of graduate and non-graduate jobs. Their typology rests upon the same premise as that of Elias and Purcell (2013)—that a graduate job is one utilising skills and knowledge largely developed within HE. Drawing upon labour force data between 1997 and 2012, the authors appear to echo the more optimistic note of Elias and Purcell (2013). They observe that, while Britain saw a significant increase in the number of graduates over their period of study, it also saw a more or less comparable growth in graduate jobs (Green and Henseke 2016, 13). However, the authors concede that the proportion of mismatched graduates, that is, where skills are under-utilised, remained stable during this period at about 30 percent (Green and Henseke 2016, 13).

Although I have dealt with these typologies here somewhat schematically with a focus on their results, it will nevertheless be apparent that different methodologies will gain different results. The question of what is meant by graduate-level employment is, therefore, complex and it is made yet further so if we look more closely at the concept of skill which underlies this issue. As Tholen et al. (2016, 509) note, graduate skills, irrespective of a graduate's subject of study, have come to be seen as a distinct set of skills gained through HE where they form a central part of an individual's employability. However, research has indicated that in some fast graduatising sectors of employment, such as estate agency work, employers place a premium on interpersonal and communication skills—the 'skills of graduates'—rather than on their university-related skills and knowledge—their 'graduate skills' (Tholen et al. 2016). This finding is further supported by Hincliffe and Jolly (2011, 575) who, in their study of employer preferences, found that interpersonal skills were valued more highly than technical knowledge at the point of recruitment, although the extent of this varied with employment sector. They go on to conclude

that, *contra* dominant HE employability discourses, there is no linear model of knowledge or skills transfer into graduate employment (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011, 581).

The concepts of graduate employment and graduate skills are thus problematic. Nevertheless, they certainly exist within both the academic and policy-level literature. Moreover, however they are measured and whatever shape they assume within the typologies discussed within this article, there is strong evidence for a persistent, structural skills under-utilisation in graduate employment. And, although the extent to which this is believed to be occurring varies considerably according to the study consulted, even the most optimistic source registered a 10 percent level of skills under-utilisation while others were considerably higher. Furthermore, the most theoretically sophisticated critiques of human capital theory and the related Skill Bias Technology Change theory (SBTC) offer a bleak prognosis of present and future demand for graduate skills in the UK. The premise of SBTC is that the demand for high-level skills is driven by technological developments over time. Failure to meet this demand will result in growing income inequalities as wage returns are contingent on skills usage. To avoid this, both individuals and nations must invest in education and training—their human capital. As Lauder, Brown and Cheung (2018) note, however, this dominant perspective on the relationship between education and technology adopts too abstract a view of the role of technology by decontextualising it from the economic and social context prevalent within the UK. Put simply, firms can employ technology to actively de-skill or offshore jobs (Lauder, Brown and Cheung 2018, 512) or straightforwardly organise production and design work to compete on a low price, low cost basis (Keep and Mayhew 2014, 770).

How though are we to frame these labour market trends outlined above as matters of social injustice? I believe we may do so if we return to Gomberg's (2007) first two supporting theses

about the relationship between contribution and esteem. As Gomberg (2007, 69) observes, humans are both a uniquely normative and normatively self-conscious species: we hold expectations of each other's behaviour which, through debate and dispute, evolve into broadly accepted norms. Where a social agent receives positive opinions through compliance with norms, they enjoy esteem and where they suffer negative opinions through a deviation from such norms, they experience disesteem (Gomberg 2007, 69). For Gomberg (2007), the norms by which we are judged revolve primarily around our contribution to the good of others, to the maintenance of our social group as broadly understood. And it is this relationship to which Gomberg (2007) refers in the elaboration of the first of his three ancillary propositions: what we contribute is key to our own self-esteem and how we are esteemed by others.

Contemporary market-led societies place a premium on work, or more specifically on paid work, as the site of our contribution to society (Gomberg 2007, 68). Put simply, work itself is normative: we are expected to do it (Gomberg, 2018). As Gomberg (2007, 70) goes on to argue, however, the social hierarchies of competitive market economies mean that by no means all ways of earning a living will inspire respect. This, in turn, highlights the contradictions and tensions within the duality of labour referred to earlier: work is both a source of vital material sustenance and reflects our social contribution to wider society. And it is this relationship between the social goods of complexity, contribution and esteem to which Gomberg refers in the second of his three ancillary theses of contributive justice: we gain greater self-esteem and esteem from others for the contribution of complex rather than routine abilities (Gomberg 2007, 66-7).

Both of Gomberg's (2007) propositions help us to understand the evidence around graduate skills underutilisation in social justice terms. For example, it has been noted that there is a



positive correlation between rising education levels and preferences for the intrinsic aspects of employment such as skills utilisation and meaningful interest (Gallie, Felstead and Green 2012). In addition, the empirical literature within the field of graduate employment clearly indicates that graduates want work in which they are able to utilise high-level skills and, when they are not able to obtain such employment, it has a negative effect upon their sense of self-esteem (Behle 2016; Hoskins, Leonard and Wilde 2018; Green and Zhu 2010; Scurry and Blenkinsop 2019). Furthermore, it is apparent from such studies of graduate underemployment that what is being denied to graduates are the two sources of esteem discussed previously: norms of identity (esteem from intrinsic satisfaction of skilled work) and norms of prestige (esteem from the prestige attached to the job). For example, when the call centre operatives in Scurry and Blenkinsop's (2019) study spoke disparagingly of being 'phone monkeys' they were bemoaning not just an under-utilisation of their skills but also a social embarrassment at their 'low-status' position.

These studies therefore seem to offer strong support for Gomberg's (2007, 70) contention that work can make us contributors to a wider social world and offer opportunities for esteem (or disesteem) in ways that leisure simply cannot. Indeed, Gomberg (2007, 73) dismisses any argument that leisure pursuits can compensate for routinised work by promoting intellectual development in noting that unchallenging work tends to dull the mind, thus making us less receptive to intellectual leisure pursuits. I shall now discuss my second proposition: that graduates from working-class backgrounds have a disproportionate likelihood of experiencing poor quality employment.

### **Social Class and Graduate Employment**

Young people from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to go to university than in the past. In the 2015-16 academic year, eighteen year-olds from the most disadvantaged groups were 78 percent more likely to enter university than their same class peers of 2006 (UCAS 2017, 2). However, greater representation within higher education has not necessarily translated into commensurate labour market success for working-class graduates as a body, as I shall presently discuss in relation to Gomberg's theory of contributive justice.

Large-scale data sets can reveal broad patterns. For example, a HEFCE study based upon data from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey found a gap of about seven percent between the 'professional employment' rate for graduates from the most disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and that for the least disadvantaged graduates, and this gap persisted at both six and forty months after graduation (HEFCE 2015, 5). Other studies that have analysed DLHE data have arrived at broadly the same conclusions about the class gap in attaining higher status employment (MacMillan and Vignoles 2013; Pollard et al. 2015). Behle (2016, 25) who specifically focused upon graduates employed in non-graduate occupations through use of large-scale data sets of graduate career trajectories, concludes that those most likely to be in non-graduate employment are from lower socio-economic backgrounds; discipline of degree was also a key factor, whereby those more likely to gain graduate-level work had studied subjects that correlate to a considerable extent with socio-economic status such as Medicine and Engineering.

A number of factors has been adduced to account for these patterns of inequality. An influential argument is Brown's (2013) view that the graduate labour market, at least at its elite corporate levels, has now shifted from being a meritocracy where credentials functioned as an accepted proxy of talent to a 'performocracy'. The expansion of higher education and the relative social

broadening of its student body mean that highly selective corporations now place the onus on whether the applicant has the cultural and social skills to produce a ‘winning performance’. The relative decline in the value of HE credentials has meant that graduates increasingly have to sell themselves via an attractively packaged ‘narrative of employability’ (Brown and Hesketh 2004) which foregrounds their accumulation of experiential assets such as internships and extra-curricular activities (ECAs). And this, in turn, has negative implications for many working-class graduates. As Tomlinson (2012, 415) notes, such graduates may be less adept at interpreting the shifting demands of employers and be more inclined to play by the rules of the ‘old game’ by enhancing their scholastic capital, a contention which is borne out by some studies (Burke 2016; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller 2013; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008).

It should be noted, however, that there are significant intra-class differences among working-class graduates, many of whom are keenly aware of the changed conditions of employer recruitment. Here, though, class inequalities may still inhere in terms of their capacity to play by the new rules of the game. Unequal access to social, cultural and material resources may place high-prestige internships and ECAs out of reach (APPG 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller 2013; Cabinet Office 2009) while for many working-class graduates the need for material survival means that doing any form of work becomes privileged over the kind of strategic job-hunting required to obtain higher status work (Burke 2016; Furlong & Cartmel 2005; Hoskins, Leonard and Wilde 2018). Thus, working-class graduate experiences of and orientations towards the labour market are by no means a homogeneous whole. Nevertheless, a range of studies reveals broad patterns of inequality in working-class graduates’ ability to obtain skilled and socially esteemed employment—eudemonistically meaningful work (Veltman 2015). Again,

though, how are to frame these inequalities as injustices of class? To do this, I turn again to the theory of contributive justice.

Firstly, the question of inequalities in relation to individuals' levels of economic, cultural and social capital needs to be placed in the perspective of Gomberg's critique of markets. Gomberg, it will be recalled, is a radical egalitarian for whom markets force an irreconcilable disjunction between two conceptions of the 'good': that to provide equal opportunity, and that of the individual's moral responsibility to their children (Gomberg, 2007, 141). Put simply, people will tend to privilege their own children's advancement over a sense of wider societal egalitarianism, and will employ all the financial and cultural resources they have to do so. The injustices produced by such an unlevel playing field may be understood by reference to Gomberg's (2007) argument for 'opportunity egalitarianism', a concept which, in turn, rests upon his distinction between 'freedom' and 'opportunity'. For Gomberg (2007, 47), as I read him, freedom connotes a formalist and minimalist absence of constraint upon action: the form of negative freedom of which Hayek (1982) approved. By contrast, opportunity is more associated with the *probability* of realising a goal and with the factors which may further it or impede it. In this respect, opportunity is much closer to the notion of positive freedom. Here, Gomberg (2007, 48) offers us a further distinction between opportunity and ability wherein ability refers *only* to those factors innate to an individual (talent, strength etc) while opportunity relates solely to variables external to the social agent. Thus, unequal opportunity is to be understood as a set of macro-level factors or, as Gomberg (2007, 48) argues, "...the ways *social structures, institutions, policies, or practices* make some achievements less likely or impossible for some people" (emphasis in original). On this reading, working-class graduates are constrained as a group not by ability but

by societal-level opportunity structures, and this constitutes a breach of the principles of opportunity egalitarianism.

There is a further reason, however, why such class inequalities in access to meaningful and skilled work are injustices within Gomberg's framework. Here I turn to the third of his key propositions: the practice of complex abilities in everyday social labour directly affects other activities and our general sense of well-being (Gomberg 2007, 66-7). Graduates who seek but do not find work that they believe to be commensurate with their skills and qualifications are likely to experience a sense of frustration at their position (Hoskins, Leonard and Wilde 2018; Scurry and Blenkinsop 2019) and even to endure mental health problems (Behle, 2016). Furthermore, as Tomlinson (2012, 423) notes, the labour market can exert a powerful socialising effect upon graduates in that their early experiences of it can either confirm or disturb emerging work-related identities and orientations that will have been developing throughout their educational careers. In this regard, Gallie, Felstead and Green (2012) note a kind of virtuous circle effect whereby individuals engaged in skilled and challenging work are most likely to express strong intrinsic job preferences and to wish to continue learning. By contrast, when graduates fail to find skilled and socially esteemed work after a period of time, they may despair of ever doing so and adjust their aspirations downwards as a means to rationalise their 'failure' (Burke 2016; Hoskins, Leonard and Wilde 2018; Scurry and Blenkinsop 2019).

For Gomberg (2007, 35) this socialising effect is a function of the structure of positions which limits the number of skilled and socially esteemed jobs and so, necessarily, limits opportunities. Indeed, Gomberg (2016, 40) goes so far as to argue that in stable societies competition needs to be 'rigged' by socialisation since pure competition could be socially disruptive, and that such socialisation operates along familiar lines of 'race' and class. I would not go quite so far as

Gomberg (2016) does here since it should be recognised that the socialising processes I have described may occur to graduates of any social class to some extent. Nevertheless, it is clear that the changing rules of graduate employment mean that it is working-class graduates who are most at risk of being in this position. Here, then, agency interacts with structure to reproduce old class inequalities but on a new education-employment terrain.

### **Discussion: Contributive Justice and the Sociology of Work**

This article has applied Paul Gomberg's theory of contributive justice to the problematic of graduates' access to meaningful and skilled employment. By drawing upon a range of literature sources, I have argued that there is evidence of persistent, class-related inequalities in gaining such employment. And, following Gomberg's framework, I have argued that working-class graduates' capacity to obtain work that develops human abilities and from which they are able to gain both personal and social esteem is a central question of social justice. However, Gomberg's political philosophy takes him beyond the ethical framework in relation to quality work that I have discussed within this article. Following his commitment to radical egalitarianism, he advocates a wholesale dismantling of two divisions of labour: organisation and execution; routine and complex work. With regard to the first division, Gomberg's philosophy is orthodox Marxian: *all* workers should share in decisions about work or, at least, have the opportunity to do so. However, it is Gomberg's proposal in relation to the second that distinguishes his philosophy as a novel and radical alternative to the labour arrangements of advanced economies: as a minimum, *all* workers (no matter how elevated their role) must share in the mundane tasks of routine-labour workers, thus permitting those workers some space to develop their skills (Gomberg 2007). For Gomberg (2007, 80), the virtues of workplace democracy may then become those of wider societal democracy.

What Gomberg (2007) is proposing, in short, is a form of ‘post-capitalist’ society or, at least, one that is very far removed from the current political economies of advanced market societies. Through his proposals he seeks to address the deficit in opportunities to obtain self-esteem and social esteem from norms of identity and norms of prestige. And Gomberg is not alone in designing a new social future. Rising levels of inequality across developed capitalist economies have aroused growing concern with quality of work/life issues. Following in Keynes’ tradition, Skidelsky and Skidelsky (2013) view work as a disutility and advocate increased leisure when underpinned by a Universal Basic Income as the path to The Good Life. By contrast, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) and Sayer (2016) are closer to Gomberg (2007) in proposing worker-led co-operative arrangements as a route towards improved work satisfaction and, ultimately, greater social egalitarianism. I shall not comment on such proposals here. The focus of this article has not been upon *how* opportunities for quality employment may be realised; rather, it is with *why* such work matters to individuals and to wider social relations. And here I believe Gomberg’s ideas have particular value. Accordingly, I shall conclude with some comments on where I believe Gomberg’s theory of contributive justice may contribute to the wider field of studies which take a sociologically-informed examination of the interface between education and work.

In writing about Gomberg, and also Bourdieu, Sayer (2011, 8) notes that sociology is clearly critical of the inequalities and power asymmetries to which it addresses itself, as illustrated by its use of terms such as ‘domination’ or ‘violence’. Critique comes in the fact that these are ‘thick ethical concepts’ which simultaneously describe a phenomenon and evaluate it. Consequently, when we employ a descriptive term we also, by implication, accept its evaluative content as we cannot neatly separate off one from the other without overall loss of meaning. If we apply Sayer’s (2011) argument to the problematic of this present study, it is apparent that the key term

employed across the literature sources I have discussed in relation to the quality of work—'skills underutilisation'—is a thick ethical concept. It describes a phenomenon of graduate skills usage (however measured) and of the quality of work, and also implies a critique of it.

Here, though, I use the word 'imply' advisedly because, as Sayer (2011, 8) goes on to observe, sociology is seen primarily to be a study of what *is* rather than what *ought* and so leaves its evaluations and justifications for its critiques largely implicit. And, certainly, this reflects the general approach of the literature discussed within this article. Ultimately, though, as Sayer (2011, 8) argues, the dissociation is artificial because labelling something as bad should necessarily mean knowing that it is bad. It has been the argument of this article that skills underutilisation is bad for the individuals who experience it. However, the evaluative question of *why* skilled and meaningful work matters to people is rarely rendered theoretically explicit within the sociologically-informed literature. Gombert's (2007) theory of contributive justice, which foregrounds work's role in the development of human flourishing and esteem, offers a critical framework that enables us to make such evaluative judgements more explicit and to offer justifications for critiques. This has implications for all studies, from within a UK context and beyond, that adopt a sociologically-informed approach to the relationship between education and employment.

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